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# Professors and Teaching

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# Professors and Teaching

By Robert W. Hill, EdD

Higher education faculty members have competing (and sometimes conflicting) responsibilities such as research and scholarship; securing external funding; service to the department, campus, and the local community; academic advising; supervising student internships or assistantships; and, of course, teaching.

Each fall many newly minted faculty across the country walk into their first classrooms after earning their advanced degrees without any prior teaching experience and little if any professional development or mentoring. They are generally assigned a couple of classes to teach and are expected to acquire on-the-job training as they tackle this very demanding work, while they are also hoping to accomplish some of the other faculty expectations, especially if they are on an annual teaching contract or face the rigors of the tenure track. We do still have private teaching institutions where teaching is valued (and not outsourced to itinerant adjuncts) and faculty can concentrate on honing their craft to the exclusion of the so-called scholarly activities. Our 1,200 community colleges would generally fall under this category as well.

Yet teaching is understood to be an inexact social science. We can all relate to having brilliant professors who certainly knew their subject matter but did not know how to teach or even how to begin to disseminate the content.

My own educational philosophy is constantly evolving. It has derived from 30 years as an educator both with K-12 and postsecondary students. I have had the good fortune to work with all types of college students, traditional undergraduate students and the nontraditional adult learners. I have also taught and advised graduate students using a variety of instructional delivery systems, from live classrooms to blended or hybrid

courses to fully online courses using a learning management system. My experience has enabled me to realize a few things about education. First, I think what one gets out of an education is directly proportional to what one invests in it. Second, teachers/professors learn as much from their students as they impart. Third, I believe that teaching is both an art and a science and that it takes time to sharpen one's pedagogical skills.

I am not the same teacher I once was as trial and error have elevated my instructional skills. While my teaching and technological literacy have vastly improved over the years, my work is not any easier and I am not putting in fewer

satisfying than sitting at commencement and seeing my former students cross the stage or see them receive academic honors. I still write each letter of recommendation from scratch and proudly list all of the dissertation students who I have chaired on my CV.

As an education professor who worked with both preservice and in-service teachers, I took my responsibility very seriously. I believe that there is no more revered or noble profession than that of teaching, and I feel passionately that my students should understand the awesome responsibility that society places on teachers. As a higher education leadership professor, I also recognize the profound role I play working with my

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hours. In fact, most college professors seem to be working longer hours, and the teaching hours have not declined either. I also still get nervous at the start of a new semester, but it is a good edginess, as I want to do well and be at the top of my game. External pressures for accountability and mastery of student learning outcomes have affected our work; however, much of the pressure that I feel is self-imposed.

While most faculty would admit to being overworked and underappreciated at their respective institutions, let me state unequivocally that teaching is still the best gig in all of higher education. I still say this despite being a year-round faculty member rather than a nine-month professor like those colleagues of mine who work for other colleges within the university. I have had my share of administrative positions, but I always come back to teaching. Nothing is more

graduate students (practitioners) and advising my dissertation students.

I also believe that teachers or professors need to be role models for their students and exhibit good teaching and scholarly practices. I try to adapt my teaching to meet the needs of my increasingly diverse students. I think one has to be a good resource for the students by keeping up with their fields to be able to point them to the current professional literature. Bridging academic theory with established practices in today's schools or on college campuses is critical. I also feel we should all promote (and then heed the advice) that education is truly a lifelong learning process and that we can always improve.

I am not here to solve the debate on what is the proper balance between research and teaching or whether having

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a tenure track is better than having multiyear teaching contracts. I do think, though, that most academics wish they had more time left over at the end of the week to do more scholarship. However, teaching and attending various meetings seem to occupy much of my weekly tasks.

As most professors do, I routinely update my course syllabi, work on PowerPoint presentations, and read new material for potential inclusion in my courses. Grading papers still takes me an inordinate amount of time to give meaningful academic feedback that is not always appreciated. I hardly have the time to keep up with the few journals to which I subscribe, let alone carve out some time to write for peer-reviewed scholarly journals. I have been the recipient of grants and have had a smattering of publications. I truly value that part of the academy, although

sometimes I wish there were more emphasis on the quality of publications rather than on quantity when considering faculty rank and promotion nationally. However, as a faculty member working for a private teaching institution with a fairly high tuition, I feel that we should all first and foremost be exemplary instructors. Once we become master teachers, I think we can then work on those other scholarly duties.

In today's private colleges or universities, especially those that are primarily tuition driven, it is not acceptable to shortchange students in feedback or to give short shrift to their needs or to ignore student evaluations. Administrators are starting to see that faculty are an important part of the overall enrollment management strategy as the quality of the teaching can surely affect student retention. While students might value the facilities and services along with their out-of-class experiences and the extracurricular activities that the

college provides, we routinely hear from the alumni how they cherished the strength of the student-faculty interactions.

Only the faculty (not the administration) can carry out higher education's chief mission of disseminating knowledge, and not all faculty are capable of helping students learn. Thus, it would behoove college and university administrators to assist current and new faculty in becoming more effective teachers. No institution can satisfy everyone, nor should it try, but a commitment to emphasis on teaching may help restore the brand and valuable word-of-mouth advertising.

*Robert W. Hill is a program professor in higher education leadership at Nova Southeastern University. ▼*